



BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATIONS CALL FOR ACTION TO ADDRESS STREET DISORDER AND CRIME IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS BC

**For Immediate Release
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Members of Business Improvement Areas of BC (BIABC) are today calling for urgent action from all three levels of government to deal with untenable street issues and crime plaguing communities across the province.

“We recognize there is a vulnerable population that suffers from addiction, mental health and homelessness in this province – and there is no disputing the need for our elected leaders to address those issues as a matter of urgency,” says Teri Smith, President of BIABC. “However, there is an immediate need to advocate for small business owners, their employees, and the communities they serve that are also being drastically impacted.”

While the issue of crime and public safety may be viewed by some as a Vancouver problem, it is clearly not, becoming increasingly prevalent in Fraser Valley communities like Langley, Abbotsford, and Surrey – On Vancouver Island – and in Interior and Northern centres like Prince George, Quesnel, Kamloops, Kelowna, and Penticton – among others.

“This is a collective crisis, and we need a collective response” says Smith, who is advocating for action by all three levels of government.

At the municipal level, BIABC is challenging all mayoral and council candidates in the October civic elections to make a commitment to support core funding that will mitigate main street issues through increased policing resources, street lighting, sanitation, and anti-graffiti programs, as well as stronger bylaw enforcement.

At the provincial level, BIABC is recommending a concerted plan to support individuals dealing with mental health, addictions and/or homelessness, actions to address the issue of prolific offenders, an examination of alternative justice options, increased police resources, implementation of assistance programs for victims of commercial crime, and improvement of the crime reporting process and response through E-COMM.

At the federal level, BIABC is advocating for the establishment of an all-party committee on Downtowns and Main Streets.

“Above all, we need a bi-partisan approach to this complex issue that is having a detrimental impact on us all, says Patricia Barnes, Advocacy Chair for BIABC. “Simply talking about these issues and deflecting to other levels of government is getting us nowhere.”

BIABC is also seeking a seat at the table and to be part of the solution. As local grassroots organizations, BIA's hold specialized knowledge and insight, as well as unique partnerships in community that may help challenge assumptions and generate out-of-the box solutions for all.

Quotes:

Jeremy Heighton – Executive Director, North Shore Kamloops BIA -

"Perception of public safety is the foundation upon which all economic development, community events, arts and cultural activities depend. The current situation is impacting employee morale, creating attraction challenges, losses due to theft and vandalism, and community safety concerns related to social disruptions. Small business owners contribute the vast majority of GDP to this province, but the current situation threatens their success across the province, and we require action to support business."

Mark Burley – Executive Director, Downtown Kelowna Association -

"The increase in demand for the Downtown Kelowna Association's (DKA) On Street services continue to grow at an alarming rate. Our Downtown On-Call is experiencing unprecedented call volume from our member businesses and visitors to Downtown Kelowna to deal with individuals with drug and mental health issues. Our Clean Team is constantly cleaning, as the street population move from space to space, and escalating crime affects businesses via theft, break-and-enters and broken street facing windows. Most alarming and frustrating, is the rate of repeat break-ins and incidents performed by repeat offenders."

Nolan Marshall – President and CEO, Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association -

"Downtown Vancouver is one of the most economically diverse and vibrant communities in North America. The urgent priority of the more than 7 thousand business owners, 100 thousand residents, and 11 million tourists that make Downtown the intersection of commerce and culture, is that we focus our attention on being one of the safest communities in North America. We stand ready to partner with community leaders and officials at all levels of government to quickly identify investments and policies that will have a real and immediate impact in achieving that goal"

Colleen Van Mook – Executive Director, Downtown Prince George (Association) -

"Downtown Prince George joins our Business Improvement Areas of BC colleagues in seeking the support of all levels of government to work together to make our downtown and every downtown in our country better. The negative impact of crime and concerns for public safety is becoming more dire every day. Our property owners are losing tenants; our businesses are losing customers and staff; and both are faced with increased costs to either prevent vandalism or remediate vandalism. The well-being of downtown and all its citizens must become a priority for collective action and community-oriented solutions."

Annette O'Shea – Executive Director, Yaletown Business Improvement Association -

"This is not a new problem, but rather a problem that has been kicked down the road by successive governments and now it has reached its breaking point. All of our communities are impacted by these deteriorating conditions and all of our communities have tried to cope. We've stepped up and have stepped up for years. The small business community actively supports crisis intervention, manages cleaning crews, safety patrols and anti-graffiti teams on a daily basis, trying to keep our main streets clean, safe, and inviting. This daily defense is exhausting and is not creating any meaningful change. We need all levels of government to work together to develop immediate solutions to this long-term problem. Our cities are in crisis, and our governments need to respond."

Jeff Bray - Executive Director, Downtown Victoria Business Association -

"Street disorder, open drug use, and mental health challenges have all been identified as the number one issue affecting our businesses in downtown Victoria. The negative impact on our economy, sense of safety among employees and customers, and the severe damage to our reputation are all reaching crisis levels. We need to admit that the current strategies are not working"

Walley Wargolet - Executive Director, Gastown Business Improvement Society –

"The erosion of social contracts is evident everywhere you look, with broken windows that lead to boarded up windows, graffiti stamped everywhere on both public and private buildings and spaces, and prolific shoplifters caught, released, and caught again all in the same day. The cost for much of these actions falls directly on the business community, and many of them barely survived COVID with others who did, now forced to close because they cannot meet this added burden. To effect real change and address the homelessness, addiction and mental health issues facing our communities, there must be a regional strategy led by the province with cooperation from all municipal governments throughout BC. Allowing individual cities to carry the burden on their own must stop now, and a more collaborative approach in helping people in the communities they were raised must be implemented."

Howie Reimer – Executive Director, Downtown Kamloops Business Improvement Association -

"Small businesses are the backbone of our economy but many are failing or under threat of doing so in part because of violence, vandalism and other social disruption. It's time for governments to act. Please address the concerns of BIABC and work multilaterally to expedite and implement solutions."

Muneesh Sharma – Executive Director, Robson Street Business Association –

"For too long, our elected officials have talked about the need to address important issues that are having a devastating impact on our streets, businesses, and communities as a whole - without a concerted plan or tangible results. It's time for some real action."

Rania Hatz - Executive Director, Cambie Village Business Association –

"Crimes, such as smashed windows for no reason are not victimless crimes. Currently there is no accountability for repeat offenders, so they repeat their actions. The cost is absorbed by small business owners and property owners who are unable to continue at this rate."

Karen Beaubier - Executive Director, Uptown Rutland Business Association -

"Our mission statement is to 'attract and expand development, business and prosperity with pride and purpose' but the current environment makes fulfilling our mandate very challenging – and business owners are frustrated. Systemic changes to the justice system need to happen as soon as possible. Yes, that's a big ask, but it's important when small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of BC's economy that continue to sustain added costs while surviving a pandemic. Having to think about maintaining employee safety and extra security measures are added stresses that are happening on a daily basis in every community in BC. How much more can they bear? It's a fair question."

Teri James - Executive Director, Downtown Langley Business Association -

"This is undeniably the most challenging time this has been for our small business owners. COVID was almost the breaking point for some businesses and now the unprecedented volume of homelessness, open drug use, mental health issues and crime has brought many to the edge of enough. This is a very complicated issue, and clearly current strategies are not working. We are seeking the support of all levels of government to work together to address these social issues before the already challenged small businesses crack under the pressure and cease to exist."

Elizabeth Model – CEO, Downtown Surrey Business Improvement Area -

“Every morning we are greeted to a steady stream of phone calls from our businesses members asking for assistance from the DSBJA’s Bike Patrol relating to inappropriate social behaviours that are detrimental to conducting business in the area. The businesses have suffered losses through fires started by overnight campers trying to keep warm, vandalism, and theft. There have been an increase of threats and racial slurs but fortunately no escalation, as of yet - in physical violence. We must work on solutions together to formulate proactive plans to ensure it does not occur.”

Patricia Barnes – Executive Director, Hastings North Business Improvement Association -

“Our businesses within the Hastings North BIA are seeing more evidence of street issues and experiencing increased vandalism, graffiti and shoplifting this year. Many of the businesses in this area are independent micro establishments and are both worried for themselves and staff as well as for the community and all who reside, visit, shop and work in the area. We want to be part of a bipartisan, collective solution that strives to put the health and safety of all in the community first.”

About the Business Improvement Areas of British Columbia:

Business Improvement Areas of British Columbia (BIABC) is the provincial champion of strong, vibrant, and successful downtowns, main streets, and commercial districts throughout our province. Members together represent more than 70 business districts that employ hundreds of thousands of retail, service, and office employees within defined business districts. Mostly small- and medium-sized businesses, they are part of maintaining community excellence and the highest quality of livability.

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